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The nomological net of perceived service quality

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Abstract (Summary)

The relationships between, and restrict the domains of, perceived service quality, perceived product value, product attitude, and customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, are explicated. Conceptual dimensions are used to explore similarities and differences between perceived service quality and related constructs. The conceptual analysis shows similarities, differences and inter-relationships which are not always recognized in service quality research and management and suggests avenues for future research.

Full Text (5761 words)

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Introduction

Perceived service quality is one of the most intriguing constructs in marketing theory as reflected by an immense amount of publications on the subject. In particular the measurement of perceived service quality has attracted substantial academic attention (Babakus and Boller, 1992; Brown et al., 1993; Cronin and Taylor, 1992, 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1988, 1991, 1994; Teas, 1993, 1994). A number of measurement tools and procedures have been developed to measure service quality from the consumers' perspective, the most notable being SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Less attention has been devoted to the conceptualization of the construct. In particular the relationship of the construct with related constructs may need clarification (see, for example, Gronroos, 1993; Oliver, 1996).

The definition of a construct is the result of a process of conceptualization and the focal point of its measurement. Broad definitions may be indicative of insufficient conceptualization, and they may lead to suboptimal measurement (see Gronroos, 1990). Note that perceived service quality is often defined as the overall discrepancy between a customer's expectations and perceptions of the service experience (Gronroos, 1982; Lewis and Booms, 1983). This definition resembles the definition of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Day, 1977; Hunt, 1977), and may be applicable for any post-purchase construct (see Oliver, 1980). Also, some researchers (Bitner, 1990; Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Bolton and Drew, 1991b; Zeithaml et al., 1991) treat satisfaction as an antecedent of perceived quality, while others (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Rust and Oliver, 1994) argue that perceived service quality is an antecedent of satisfaction. Churchill and Surprenant (1982) even suggest that perceived quality is a surrogate for satisfaction. Some researchers argue that perceived service quality is similar in many ways to an attitude (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Bolton and Drew, 1991a, 1991b; Olshavsky, 1985), or as Cronin and Taylor (1994, p. 126) put it, "a long-term attitude", which represents and performs functions similar to those served by values, while others (e.g. Oliver, 1996) do not.

Recent studies have highlighted the relationships between perceived service quality and other constructs like satisfaction (Oliver, 1993), satisfaction and value (Rust and Oliver, 1994), satisfaction and purchase intentions (Taylor and Baker, 1994), and encounter satisfaction and overall satisfaction (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994). These studies focused on the hierarchical and/or empirical relationships between constructs. Research seems still to be needed to specify on what grounds the constructs are related, i.e. to specify the conceptual foundations of the hierarchical and empirical relationships (Blalock, 1982). Cronin and Taylor (1994) argue that it is time for service marketers to arrive at a commensurable agreement about the domains of service quality, consumer satisfaction, and service value. By restricting the domains of service quality, consumer satisfaction and other related constructs, our understanding of how these constructs interact in consumer decision-making processes might be enhanced. Both research on and management of these constructs might be facilitated.

In this paper we offer a first step towards such agreement on domains and how the constructs are associated

on these domains. Constructs that all deal with a particular aspect of consumer behaviour (purchasing) but that have originated from different paradigms expressing different perspectives or dimensions on purchase-related assessments and decisions. Using these different dimensions we distinguished perceived service quality from closely related constructs like perceived product value, product attitude and customer satisfaction. We examined definitions and conceptualizations used in important contributions in this research area to clarify the constructs, and reviewed the literature on the constructs to reach consensus about dimensional differences and similarities between them, and to clarify their inter-relationships.

A few examples might illustrate the importance of using multiple dimensions in defining constructs. Specifying that service quality is the difference between expectations and performance is not sufficient to discriminate service quality from satisfaction. Specifying that product value is a trade-off between benefits and costs is insufficient to distinguish product value from constructs like satisfaction and attitude. Defining attitude in terms of a composition of cognitive, affective, and conative aspects does not preclude that the construct is not confused with a construct like purchase intention.

Conceptualization

Emphasis on measurement and de-emphasis on conceptualization of constructs is common in the early stages of a discipline (Hunt, 1977a). It is a commonplace observation within science that theoretical terms and targets of measurement schemes are often, for long periods of time, understood in only vague or even flawed terms (Snyder and Gangestad, 1986). During this period scientists may experience some obstruction of science development, and recognize the obscurity into which their linguistic practices lead them. They struggle along, trying, in a piecemeal way, to make their statements more exact, so that they will at least know what they are talking about (Kitcher, 1985).

Conceptualization involves a series of processes in which theoretical constructs, ideas, and concepts are clarified, distinguished, and given definitions to reach a reasonable degree of consensus and understanding of the theoretical ideas we are trying to express (Blalock, 1982). Within conceptualization of a construct, its nomological net is of importance. A nomological net is " ... the predicted pattern of relationships that would permit naming a construct" (Cook and Campbell, 1979, p. 70). The nomological net is an aspect of construct validity and represents the way in which a construct relates to other constructs and to potential operationalization. The links between theoretical constructs are of interest because one would like to achieve discriminant validity by specifying what the target construct is not. Such linkages are important as it may be more desirable to operationalize an alternative construct than the target construct if the latter proves relatively inaccessible and if the nomological net indicates that the alternative construct either largely determines or is largely determined by the target construct.

Constructs and dimensions

First, constructs that are compared to perceived service quality were selected. Second, dimensions used to clarify the commonalities and differences between the constructs were chosen. Third, the extant literature on these constructs was reviewed along the selected dimensions.

Satisfaction, product attitude and product value seem to be relevant constructs with which to compare perceived service quality. Perceived service quality is often treated as an antecedent, synonym or successor of these constructs in the literature (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Holbrook and Corfman, 1985; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Zeithaml, 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1991). Furthermore, perceived service quality, satisfaction, product attitude and product value have the same principle of classification (Hanfmann and Kasanin, 1937), i.e. they can be classified as "consumer and behavioural-based". The selected constructs are all subjective; they reside in the customer's mind, and they are expected to drive customer retention and future choice (Rust and Oliver, 1994).

To clarify and compare constructs it is valid to use conceptual dimensions (see Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; Holbrook, 1994; Holbrook and Corfman, 1985; Oliver, 1993). As all four constructs deal with (re)purchase decision making, i.e. the acquisition, experience, retention and future choice of services, we determined six dimensions for the conceptual analysis and examination of the nomological net of perceived service quality:

- (1) Time. As all four constructs deal with (re)purchase decisions, a distinction can be made between constructs that are pre-purchase and constructs that are post-purchase decision based.

- (2) Basis. As (re)purchase decisions are based on a trade-off between benefits and costs (i.e. monetary and non-monetary sacrifices), constructs may comprise either get or give components, or the trade-off between the two.

- (3) Object. As the constructs deal with the interaction of a consumer with a service, they may reflect information about the object (service), or the subject (consumer).

- (4) Content. The construct may cover a person's knowledge, opinions, beliefs and thoughts about the object, held with varying degrees of certitude about what is true or false (cognitive). It also may capture feelings and evaluations of the beliefs (affective). A third component may be a readiness to act or inclination to respond (conative).

- (5) Context. Sometimes assessments are influenced by product and situational factors such as the performance level delivered by competitors. Such relative assessments may be distinguished from absolute assessments which are not affected by such frame of reference.

- (6) Aggregation. As consumer buying is often a recurring process, related constructs can deal with only one transaction (one single episode) and/or the relationship (the aggregation of a diversity of transactions).

To investigate the degree of consensus on the domains of the selected constructs, and to investigate the discriminating power of the dimensions, we applied them to published studies that have had an important impact on the field as indicated by their frequent inclusion in reference lists of other studies, their inclusion in services marketing textbooks (e.g. Bateson, 1995; Gronroos, 1990; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), as well as by the research they stimulated.

Two judges working independently reviewed the sample of published studies. Each judge determined how the constructs used or discussed in that study were defined or applied with respect to the six suggested dimensions. For example, in the Swan and Trawick (1981) restaurant study, satisfaction was measured using items such as "the amount of food" (a get component) and "the amount of cost" (a give component (see Table I)). The judgements of both judges matched in 84 per cent of the cases. Inconsistencies were resolved through discussion.

Table I presents the results of the content analysis. Blanks in the Table mean that the article does not provide information on the dimension of interest. Inspection of Table I indicates that the use of multiple dimensions allows us to discriminate between constructs that are sometimes thought to be the same.

The nomological net

Using the conceptual dimensions we examined the specific domains of, i.e. the similarities and differences between, the constructs and their nomological net. Below we describe each of the components in the nomological net and give a synthesis of our findings. The nomological net is presented in Figure 1.

Perceived service quality

Perceived service quality involves the overall discrepancy between a customer's expectations of a service and his/her perception of performance (Gronroos, 1984; Lewis and Booms, 1983). In order to judge quality before purchase and consumption, quality expectations are formed that act as references for post-purchase quality assessments. According to Gronroos (1984) these expectations are influenced by the consumer's view of the service firm (image). Quality expectations can be distinguished in either quality estimates or quality norms (e.g. Liljander and Strandvik, 1992). Estimates can be defined as an objective calculation of the probability (Miller, 1977) or predictions of the focal product's performance (estimated quality) or costs (estimated costs). Norms, on the other hand, often resemble averaged cost and performance experiences in the past (Cadotte et al., 1987) and they in turn may affect future estimates (Boulding et al., 1993) (see Figure 1). Zeithaml (1988) treats perceived quality as a beneficial attribute and distinguishes it from price, which is what is sacrificed to obtain the benefits. She defines perceived quality as the consumer's judgement of a product's overall excellence or superiority. Service quality assessments can range from "bad" to "good". Although most researchers treat perceived service quality as a cognitive evaluation of multiple attributes, some researchers believe it is (also) an affective judgement (see Table I). While originally, perceived service quality expressed a relationship judgement, i.e. an aggregation over a number of transactions (Brown and Swartz, 1989; Parasuraman et al., 1988, 1991), it is currently also used for single transactions (Reidenbach and Sandifer-Smallwood, 1990; Strandvik, 1994; Woodside et al., 1989). Although perceived quality is generally treated as a post-purchase construct (e.g. Holbrook and Corfman, 1985), some researchers (Oliver, 1993; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Taylor and Baker, 1994) believe that perceived service quality is both a pre- and post-purchase construct as they argue that an interaction with the service is not needed to assess quality.

Perceived product value

In Zeithaml's (1988) means-end model, perceived quality is presented as an antecedent of perceived value. Perceived value is modelled here as the result from trading off quality perceptions, and monetary and non-monetary sacrifices or as Rust and Oliver (1994, p. 10) put it " ... value is equal to the utility of quality minus the disutility of price" and tends to be more comprehensive than perceived quality (Bolton and Drew, 1991b; Holbrook, 1994; Holbrook and Corfman, 1985). Holbrook and Corfman (1985) define product value as an interactive relativistic preference experience. Perceived product value is also generally treated as an overall multi-attribute evaluative product-related judgement (see Table I). Product values can range from "low" to "high", and they are based on a variety of specific product-attribute beliefs (Holbrook and Corfman, 1985; Steenkamp, 1990). Like quality, perceived value is considered on both the relationship (Bolton and Drew, 1991b; Rust and Oliver, 1994) and the transaction level (Rust and Oliver, 1994). According to Holbrook and Corfman (1985), perceived value is also experience-based, as it resides in the consumption of the (in)tangible product. Hence, perceived value is viewed as a post-purchase construct (see Table I).

Product attitude

According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993) an attitude is a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object or issue. Attitudes are learned dispositions and are often the result of past evaluated experiences. Product attitudes are especially useful in expressing the feeling of an ongoing relationship with the product or product category (Holbrook and Corfman, 1985; Oliver, 1980). In addition, product attitudes are considered as the "colouring filter" in expectation assessments (Bolton and Drew, 1991a), a characteristic also attributed to image (Gronroos, 1984). Consumers may have an attitude towards a product before purchasing it. Product attitude, for example, can be the result of product category experiences, i.e. the effect is transferred to the unexperienced product. Table I shows that product attitude, however, is both treated as a pre-purchase and post-purchase decision construct. Like product value, product attitudes are based on behavioural benefits as well as on behavioural costs (Verhallen and Pieters, 1984). Product attitude is a more general conception of a product (Bolton and Drew, 1991a; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), and it incorporates affective and behavioural components. Like perceived service quality and perceived value, product attitudes are composed of a diversity of judgements, i.e. they are based on multi-attribute evaluations. Attitudes can range from "unfavourable" to "favourable". Oliver (1981) and Churchill and Surprenant (1982) state that product attitude can be assessed as the sum of satisfactions with the various attributes of the product (category) or the service. According to Oliver (1981), attitudes are absolute.

Customer satisfaction

Satisfaction can be defined as "...the consumer's fulfilment response. It is a judgement that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under- or overfulfilment" (Oliver, 1996, p. 14). Satisfaction involves both cognitive and affective components (Rust and Oliver, 1994) as they are subject to psychosocial influences such as attributions (Folkes, 1984; Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988), moods and equity considerations (Oliver and Swan, 1989a,b; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Woodruff et al., 1983). Satisfaction can range from "dissatisfied" to "satisfied". (Dis)satisfied consumers feel bad or good and therefore a self-evaluation is involved. Satisfaction is characterized by the surprise (Oliver, 1981), the contentment, the pleasure, and/or the relief (Woodruff et al., 1983) a customer experiences after a purchase or service encounter. Customer satisfaction results from the consumer's comparison of rewards and costs of the purchase to the self, relative to anticipated consequences (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). That is, satisfaction entails a trade-off between give and get components on a transactional basis (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Roth and Bozinoff, 1989; Swan et al., 1981), although Bitner and Hubbert (1994) argue that consumers can also be satisfied on an overall basis. According to Oliver (1993 p. 76) "Satisfaction judgments can result from any dimension, quality related or not..., e.g. an inoperative credit card telesystem is not under the control of the applying organization and thus cannot be considered as a 'quality' dimension". This experience, however, may affect customer satisfaction. As perceived quality on the transactional level may be an input or antecedent of satisfaction, the latter construct comprises more than perceived service quality (Anderson and Fornell, 1994; Troye et al., 1995). Satisfaction is generally treated as a post-purchase construct, because subject-object interaction is indispensable (see Table I). Satisfaction, like perceived quality, is generally treated as a relativistic judgement (Cadotte et al., 1987; Oliver 1980; Westbrook, 1980).

Towards a synthesis

Effective management of assessments and judgements on constructs like service quality, value, satisfaction and attitude requires a clear understanding of what the construct means to the customer. Within this perspective we agree with Strandvik (1994, p. 7) that "...the core concept service quality...needs to be strictly defined in order...to be theoretical and empirically useful".

Our analysis indicates that although there is agreement on some domains of perceived service quality and its related constructs, more consensus is needed. Particularly the dimension aggregation shows mixed results.

Some authors claim that service quality is restricted to relationships and view satisfaction as an antecedent of quality (e.g. Parasuraman et al., 1991), whereas others argue that quality as a construct is also useful on the transaction level, in which case it is an antecedent of satisfaction (e.g. Rust and Oliver, 1994). Note that when the level of aggregation of both constructs is identical, there is less dispute that quality is an antecedent of satisfaction. Whereas research indicates that quality and satisfaction can be used on both the transactional and relationship level (e.g. Liljander and Strandvik, 1995), Oliver (1981) disagrees and argues that, in time, satisfactions become and resemble attitudes as the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations will be temporal. Our content analysis also reveals that whereas most authors treat attitude as a pre-purchase construct some treat it as a post-purchase construct as well. We like to argue, however, that although prior attitudes may be adapted by purchase experiences, this does not necessarily imply that product attitude resides in the purchase itself and its subsequent consumption, which is the prerequisite for being a post-purchase construct (Holbrook and Corfman, 1985). Hence, we believe it is most fruitful to restrict attitude to the pre-purchase process and satisfaction to the post-purchase process. Another dispute is whether quality is also a pre-purchase construct as argued by Oliver (1993), Bitner and Hubbert (1994) and Rust and Oliver (1994). We agree with Liljander and Strandvik (1992) who have persuasively argued that expected service quality is an estimate of a possible future of this post-purchase construct.

The current analysis suggests that earlier statements such as that perceived quality is a "long-term attitude" (Cronin and Taylor, 1992, p. 126), that it is a surrogate for customer satisfaction (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982), that "... service quality is...likely to be influenced by more variables than satisfaction" (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994, p. 77), that "...quality perceptions do not require experience with the service provider," or that "...satisfaction, in contrast, is purely experiential" (Oliver, 1993, p. 76) might need revision.

We would like to propose a delineation of the domains of perceived service quality, perceived value, product attitude and customer satisfaction as labelled in Table II. Perceived service quality is a relativistic and cognitive discrepancy between experience-based norms and performances concerning service benefits. Perceived quality can be transaction- and relationship-specific and is, with perceived costs, one of the antecedents of perceived value. Satisfaction, on the other hand, is an affective self-evaluation, based on perceived cost and perceived quality trade-offs (perceived product value) of a transaction. Eventually, satisfactions may become or influence product attitude, which may be regarded as an aggregated but not relativistic construct involving a readiness to act, and which might be an input to perceived quality and perceived costs assessments. Figure 1 shows the dynamic inter-relationships of perceived service quality and connected constructs. Whereas service quality is basically a post-purchase construct, its expectations will be assessed in advance in which product attitude plays a role. These expectations will be used as reference points in judging service quality delivery. Comparing the quality received with the associated costs is the basis of perceived value. Transforming this cognition into an effect will result in customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, which, over time and with a lower level of arousal, will strengthen or readjust product attitude.

Conclusions and implications

As we believe that there is a need to delineate boundaries of constructs, we have tried to clarify the conceptual relationships between the constructs perceived service quality, product value, customer satisfaction and attitude. Using six dimensions we examined the nomological net of perceived service quality. These dimensions are time, basis, object, content, context and aggregation. We distinguished the constructs and extended earlier work.

We suggest that perceived service quality should be treated strictly as a relativistic (not absolute), cognitive (not affective), product-related (not consumer-related), post-purchase (not a pre-purchase) evaluation of get-components (not sacrifices). It can be conceptualized and measured on the transactional and the relationship level. The point to make is that knowledge and agreement on what specific grounds service quality is related to, for example satisfaction, might enable the management of satisfaction, as service quality is more under the control of the service organization.

Perhaps more emphasis on the distinctive characteristics of perceived service quality will enable marketing academics and practitioners to study and manage perceived service quality and related constructs more thoroughly. Marketing academics may want to attend to at least three issues in perceived service quality research and measurement.

First, in order to gain a better understanding of perceived service quality, it seems important to consider cognitive "get" components only (benefit-related). This does not mean that give and/or affective components are irrelevant, on the contrary, yet they are already captured by other constructs such as by perceived product value and customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Recent research treats affect as an important aspect of perceived service quality (e.g. Oliver, 1993). We believe that it is better to keep perceived service quality cognitive and product-based than affective and consumer-based.

Second, more perceived service quality research is needed on the transactional level as research and measurement on a relationship level has attracted the bulk of marketers' attention. Research concerning perceived service quality on a transactional level, in particular, can be used to get feedback information on the market performance of service operations (Strandvik, 1994). While research concerning relationship perceived service quality (e.g. SERVQUAL and SERVPERF) is useful for strategy assessment, transactional research may be useful as a diagnostic tool to determine the basis of the (good or bad) relational perceived service quality. The combination of both is useful in monitoring everyday service production processes. In addition, future research might investigate the meanings that service transactions have for consumers (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994). Perhaps customers are already assessing satisfaction or perceived quality judgements during the service delivery process. Hence, concurrent measurements of service experiences and how they feed into perceived service quality and satisfaction seems important. Modelling such experiences and their relationships to perceived service quality is a challenge.

Third, future research may also address the relativistic characteristic of perceived quality. Customers of services can often make choices between multiple suppliers in multiple situations. For instance, quality standards may be low when only one restaurant is available and high when intense competition between restaurants exists.

Of course, our approach has only been conceptual. We have tried to specify similarities and differences between related constructs, and we have tried to model their relationships using theoretical tools and the results of prior research. This has resulted in the nomological net of perceived service quality. Perhaps it is now time to determine the strength of the relationships empirically.

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[Illustration]

Caption: Table I; Research classified on the conceptual dimensions; Table I; Element 2; Figure 1; The nomological net of perceived service quality; Table II; Dimensions of perceived service quality and related constructs

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